

*All Aboard: Will the United States Jump on Board High-Speed Rail or Miss the Train*

By: Andrew Olek

**Laying the Track (An Introduction and Roadmap):**

I have lived in Western New York nearly all of my life. Western New York gains the attention of the national media for a few things: snow, chicken wings and our professional sports teams. However, if you travel outside the United States, specifically to Europe, say “Western New York” to a European and most just hear “New York.” I have been fortunate to travel to Europe and when I tell people I am from New York, they instantly think New York City. I kindly explain to them that there is more to New York State than just New York City. They smile and nod, but then go right back to talking about New York City. They are surprised when I tell them I have only been to the City once in my life. They don’t understand how I could live in New York all my life and have only made one trip to the City. It is not that I do not like New York City; it is just very difficult to get there from Western New York. It is an eight-hour drive, a nine-hour train ride or an hour flight, which usually turns into five hours with delays and airport security.

Contrast those scenarios with this one: When I was in Europe I could go from London to Paris in two hours or Rome to Florence in ninety minutes; all without the hassle of airport security or attempting to drive on European highways. High-speed trains made it extremely easy to travel around Europe efficiently and without spending a fortune. Why are there no high-speed trains to take me from Buffalo to New York City?

The United States is a driving country; in 2010, Americans drove over three trillion miles.<sup>1</sup> However, the United States has an infrastructure problem. The highways and bridges in

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<sup>1</sup> Copeland, Larry. “Metro areas’ traffic congestion up 11% in 2010.” *USA Today*. March 3, 2011. [http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2011-03-08-1Acongestion08\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2011-03-08-1Acongestion08_ST_N.htm).

the United States are deteriorating. Constant repaving of roadways masks the deeper and potentially dangerous problems. Tragedies like the 2007 collapse of the Mississippi River Bridge in Minneapolis, Minnesota bring the infrastructure problem to the forefront, but only for a brief period of time. Do Americans really love to drive, or do they lack an efficient alternative?

In Japan, China and most European countries, high-speed rail (“HSR”) provides citizens with this alternative that is lacking in the United States. This paper will explore the ongoing process of bringing HSR to the United States, specifically, the Western New York (“WNY”) region. It will first explain who the major players attempting to bring HSR to the United States are. Next it will examine what HSR is and how it has been successful in other countries. It will also explore the environmental impact of HSR on the WNY region. Finally, it will examine the reasons for the slow progress of bringing HSR to WNY—considering the issue has been proposed, explored and discussed for over twenty years.

### **Who Is Involved in the High-Speed Rail Chase**

Before exploring what HSR is, it is important to understand the actors involved in the HSR debate, both nationally and locally. A national HSR system is a major goal of the Obama Administration. In his 2011 State of the Union Address, President Obama stressed the importance of improving America’s infrastructure.<sup>2</sup> Two weeks after that speech, Vice President Biden announced a “comprehensive plan” to help the United States reach President Obama’s goal of “giving 80 percent of Americans access to high-speed rail within 25 years.”<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>2</sup> “Vice President Biden Announces Six Year Plan to Build National High-Speed Rail Network.” Press Release. The White House. Official Website. 2011. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/08/vice-president-biden-announces-six-year-plan-build-national-high-speed-r>

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

proposal dedicated \$53 billion over six years to the construction of a national HSR network.<sup>4</sup> In New York State, Governor Cuomo began advocating for HSR days after winning the gubernatorial election by not only stating his support for HSR in New York State, but also writing the United States Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood seeking to secure HSR funding that Wisconsin and Ohio rejected.<sup>5</sup> In Western New York, Representative Louise Slaughter of the 28<sup>th</sup> District has made bringing HSR to WNY one of her “highest priorities.”<sup>6</sup> Representative Slaughter has continually voted against proposals that would cut funding to WNY’s HSR project; while she admits cuts to the budget are necessary, she believes HSR is a smart investment that will “leave our country more competitive now and in the future.”<sup>7</sup> Despite the support of HSR from the Obama Administration and key political actors in New York State, HSR faces opponents, who feel the project is too costly or an inefficient use of taxpayer money. However, European countries, Japan and China provide examples of successful HSR systems.

### **There Are Already Trains in the United States, What Makes a Train High-Speed?**

The definition of HSR varies depending on the country. In the European Union, trains running up to speeds of 124 miles per hour (on upgraded track) and speeds of up to 155 miles per hour (on ‘fast track’) are considered high-speed.<sup>8</sup> In Japan, high-speed trains reach speeds of 186 miles per hour;<sup>9</sup> and in China high-speed trains run at 217 miles per hour; however, one line

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<sup>4</sup> “Vice President Biden Announces Six Year Plan to Build National High-Speed Rail Network.” Press Release. The White House. Official Website. 2011. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/08/vice-president-biden-announces-six-year-plan-build-national-high-speed-r>

<sup>5</sup> Marsh, Dylan. “Cuomo Already Pushing For High Speed Rail.” Nov. 7, 2010.

<http://www.buffalorising.com/2010/11/cuomo-already-pushing-for-high-speed-rail.html>

<sup>6</sup> Slaughter, Rep. Louise M., “High Speed Rail.” Official Website. 2011.

[http://www.louise.house.gov/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=77&Itemid=130](http://www.louise.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=77&Itemid=130)

<sup>7</sup> Slaughter, Rep. Louise M. “Slaughter Votes To Continue Funding Federal Government.” News Release. March 1, 2011. 2011 WLNR 4053133.

<sup>8</sup> International Union of Railways. “About High Speed Rail.” Official Website, 2011.

<http://www.uic.org/spip.php?rubrique867>

<sup>9</sup> Hood, Christopher P. *Shinkansen: From bullet train to symbol of modern Japan*, 2006.

reaches a top speed of 268 miles per hour.<sup>10</sup> This wide range of speeds alludes to the continuing improvement and advancement in HSR technology. A simple definition for purposes of HSR in the United States could be any train that runs faster than the current passenger rail trains, which run between speeds of 50 to 90 miles per hour.<sup>11</sup> In the United States, there is currently one HSR corridor—the Northeast Corridor, which runs from Boston to Washington, D.C.<sup>12</sup> Despite being labeled a high-speed corridor, trains average speeds of only 68 miles per hour and rarely reach their top speed of 100 miles per hour.<sup>13</sup> A substantial investment, such as the one proposed by President Obama, is necessary to ensure HSR in the United States is cost-effective and consumer efficient like those systems in foreign countries.

### **The Benefits of High-Speed Rail**

The potential benefits of HSR in the United States are numerous and range from economic benefits to environmental benefits. According to the Federal Railroad Administration (“FRA”), HSR provides a safe and efficient transportation means for business commuters, as well as travelers.<sup>14</sup> HSR in the United States would not only ease traffic congestion in busy metro areas, but it would also provide an efficient means of intercity and intra-city transportation.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, HSR has been associated with “smart growth” because it can “foster higher-density development than has typically been associated with highways and

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.peoplerrail.com/xinwen/20101027/n324636648.html>

<sup>11</sup> New York State Department of Transportation. “Online Public Briefing.” 1999-2011.

<https://www.nysdot.gov/content/delivery/Main-Projects/S93751-Home/S93751Repository/ECHSR%20Online%20Public%20Scoping%20Briefing%202010-10-21.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> “High-Speed Rail Strategic Plan: Press Release & Highlights.” U.S. Department of Transportation. April 16, 2009. <http://www.fra.dot.gov/Downloads/RRdev/hsrpressrelease.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Rendell, Edward G. & Peter A. Peyser, Jr. “A Northeast-Corridor Bullet Train.” *The Wall Street Journal*. March 16, 2011. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704893604576200872143551748.html>.

<sup>14</sup> “Vision for High-speed rail in America.” Federal Railroad Administration. April 2009.

<http://www.fra.dot.gov/downloads/rrdev/hsrstrategicplan.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

airports.”<sup>16</sup> HSR networks provide a means for people to enter city areas and connect them to the public transportation available in those cities such as public buses or subways.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, HSR would stimulate economic growth in two ways. First, it would “help serve the needs of national and regional commerce...by offering travelers convenient access to economic centers.”<sup>18</sup> Second, it would “generate high-skilled construction and operating jobs,” as well as manufacturing jobs to produce the “rail, control systems, locomotives, and passenger cars.”<sup>19</sup> Finally, from an environmental standpoint HSR corridors have the potential to result in “an annual reduction of 6 billion pounds of CO<sub>2</sub>.”<sup>20</sup>

Besides the FRA, the US High Speed Rail Association suggests that HSR would reduce our dependency on foreign oil and significantly reduce the United States’ \$700 billion dollar a year oil purchase trade deficit.<sup>21</sup> The current transportation system in the United States causes \$87.2 billion lost in automotive gridlock per year.<sup>22</sup> This equates to 2.8 billion gallons of wasted gasoline and 4.2 billion hours stuck in traffic congestion.<sup>23</sup> There is clearly a problem with the current transportation system in the United States and many people believe HSR is the solution. The Obama Administration has taken the first step in solving this problem by proposing the HSR network across the United States.

### **High-Speed Rail in New York State**

One of the major areas highlighted in the Federal government’s proposed HSR project was the Northeast. In January of 2010, President Obama announced New York State would

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<sup>16</sup> *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> “Vision for High-speed rail in America.” Federal Railroad Administration. April 2009.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.*

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> US High Speed Rail Association. “High Speed Rail.” Official Website. 2010.

<http://www.ushsr.com/?5196fe00?dfa51120>

<sup>22</sup> Nassbaum, Paul. “Europe’s high-speed rail revolution may spread to U.S.” August 8 2010.

[http://articles.philly.com/2010-08-08/news/24971401\\_1\\_high-speed-rail-ave-train-air-travel/2](http://articles.philly.com/2010-08-08/news/24971401_1_high-speed-rail-ave-train-air-travel/2).

<sup>23</sup> *Id.*

receive \$151 million for HSR projects.<sup>24</sup> At the time of the announcement, Representative Slaughter estimated the HSR project would bring 12,000 new jobs to New York State.<sup>25</sup> The New York State project, called the “Empire Corridor,” would stretch from Niagara Falls to New York City and connect to the Northeast Corridor.<sup>26</sup> However, the idea to develop HSR across New York State, specifically the WNY region, is not a new idea. In 1990, legislation passed in the New York State Assembly approving a study to explore bringing HSR to WNY.<sup>27</sup> In 1992, a proposal to build as many as six HSR lines across New York over a ten-year period was discussed.<sup>28</sup> The goal was to eliminate highway congestion, and provide a more cost effective means of getting from Buffalo to New York City than flying.<sup>29</sup> The price tag for the proposal was \$21 million per mile or \$10.6 billion for the Buffalo to New York City route.<sup>30</sup> The high cost was ultimately the reason behind the demise of the proposal. The high cost of construction of a HSR network could potentially derail the current proposal for the Empire Corridor.

### **What Is Wrong With the Current Rail System in New York?**

Before examining the HSR project proposed for the Empire Corridor, it is first important to understand why the current passenger rail system is, as Representative Slaughter called it, an “embarrassment that is falling apart.”<sup>31</sup> Currently all passenger trains in New York State share

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<sup>24</sup> Slaughter, Rep. Louise M., “High Speed Rail.” Official Website. 2011.

[http://www.louise.house.gov/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=77&Itemid=130](http://www.louise.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=77&Itemid=130)

<sup>25</sup> Buscarino, Elena Cala. “High Speed Rail: Money Sent Our Way.” Jan. 28, 2010.

<http://www.buffalorising.com/2010/01/high-speed-rail-money-sent-our-way.html>

<sup>26</sup> Buscarino, Elena Cala. “High Speed Rail: Money Sent Our Way.” Jan. 28, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> “State Will Join Rail-Line Study.” *The Buffalo News*. Jan. 10, 1990. 1990 WLNR 805382.

<sup>28</sup> McCarthy, Robert J. “Much Rides On State’s Push for High-Speed Trains.” *The Buffalo News*. Jan. 5, 1992. 1992 WLNR 944802.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.*

<sup>30</sup> McCarthy, Robert J. “Much Rides On State’s Push for High-Speed Trains.” *The Buffalo News*. Jan. 5, 1992. 1992 WLNR 944802.

<sup>31</sup> The Albany Business Review. “NY explores ways to fund high-speed rail.” June 15, 2010.

<http://www.bizjournals.com/buffalo/stories/2010/06/14/daily16.html>

the rails with freight trains.<sup>32</sup> The shared track means passenger trains cannot reach their highest speeds, causing long travel times and delays for travelers.<sup>33</sup> It currently takes just less than nine hours to travel from Buffalo to New York City via train.<sup>34</sup> In addition to long travel times, the current system offers minimal departure times and infrequent routes between cities.<sup>35</sup> Due to these factors and the condition of current tracks, passenger trains are not a reliable option for travelers and fail to provide an efficient alternative to driving or flying.<sup>36</sup> The goal for HSR in the Empire Corridor is to eliminate all of the current problems with passenger rail. Trains would travel at a minimum speed of 110 miles per hour, with the possibility of reaching 150 miles per hour on some stretches of track.<sup>37</sup> This would cut travel times in half and allow rail carriers to increase the number of daily routes between cities.<sup>38</sup> Frequency and reliability would also be increased by the creation of tracks designed specifically for HSR passenger trains.<sup>39</sup> This would allow HSR trains to reach and travel at their highest potential speed for most of the trip's duration.<sup>40</sup> The proposed plan also estimates that HSR would result in a reduction of the carbon footprint by as much as eighty percent versus cars and sixty-six percent versus airplanes.<sup>41</sup> There are a substantial number of benefits to HSR, and it can be argued that these benefits outweigh the sizable cost of the Empire Corridor project.

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<sup>32</sup> New York State Department of Transportation. "Online Public Briefing." 1999-2011. <https://www.nysdot.gov/content/delivery/Main-Projects/S93751-Home/S93751--Repository/ECHSR%20Online%20Public%20Scoping%20Briefing%202010-10-21.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> New York State Department of Transportation. "Online Public Briefing." 1999-2011.

<sup>36</sup> New York State Department of Transportation. "Online Public Briefing." 1999-2011.

<sup>37</sup> The Albany Business Review. "NY explores ways to fund high-speed rail." June 15, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> New York State Department of Transportation. "Online Public Briefing." 1999-2011.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*

## **High-Speed Rail In Western New York**

Representative Slaughter has taken an adversarial approach to HSR, specifically HSR in the WNY region. She has secured funding for several key aspects, which are essential to a successful HSR network in WNY including improvements to stations in Depew and Rochester, New York.<sup>42</sup> In addition, she has also requested funding for improvements to the Niagara Branch tracks (running from Buffalo to Niagara Falls); funding for a third passenger track running through the Rochester area; funding to improve the Niagara Falls station; and funding to realign tracks in Rochester and build high-level platforms to accommodate high-speed trains.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the general benefits of HSR, the WNY region could see a substantial benefit from an economic and job creation standpoint. The High Speed Rail New York Coalition's "Statement of Regional Impact" suggests that Western and Upstate New York (Niagara Falls to Syracuse) feature 30 companies that supply \$750 million worth of private goods to the rail industry.<sup>44</sup> These companies employ over 3,000 individuals and there are an additional 11,000 individuals employed by industries who produce goods to sectors are heavily relied upon by the rail industry.<sup>45</sup> The Coalition suggests these companies would benefit from the construction of a HSR network in the WNY region through the need for rail products.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, there is the potential for the "densification of labor markets, spurred by enhanced inter-city passenger rail service."<sup>47</sup> The reduction of travel times between cities opens up more options for jobseekers. The Coalition believes a HSR system in New York could create two distinct labor markets: The Buffalo/Niagara Falls/Rochester Metro Area and the

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<sup>42</sup> Slaughter, Rep. Louise M., "High Speed Rail." Official Website. 2011.

[http://www.louise.house.gov/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=77&Itemid=130](http://www.louise.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=77&Itemid=130).

<sup>43</sup> Slaughter, Rep. Louise M., "High Speed Rail." Official Website. 2011.

<sup>44</sup> High Speed Rail New York Coalition. "Regional Impact Statement." July 31, 2009.

<http://www.louise.house.gov/images/stories/attachments/2009.10.20.hsrcoalitionimpactreport.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> *Id.*

<sup>47</sup> *Id.*



Rochester/Syracuse Metro Area.<sup>48</sup> HSR would mean the cities in these metro areas would be within one hour of each other creating opportunities for employment that do not exist with the current transportation system.<sup>49</sup>

The formation of these new metro areas is helped by another suggested benefit of HSR—the revitalization of urban development.<sup>50</sup> Many of the HSR stations would be located within walking distance of the city’s central business districts. The Coalition believes there is the potential for urban development as passengers, tourists and workers would all exit stations in these business districts creating the need for shops, restaurants and other amenities.<sup>51</sup> The Coalition suggests that Buffalo and Syracuse have seen a slight revitalization of their downtown areas, and the ability of HSR to transport large numbers of people quickly into and out of the city, whether for work or leisure, would expedite the revitalization of these downtown areas.<sup>52</sup>

One such project that has the potential to revitalize downtown Buffalo is the renovation of the Central Terminal. Central Terminal believes it would be the most effective location for a HSR station in the City of Buffalo.<sup>53</sup> Central Terminal is centrally located and already houses additional transportation means such as buses and taxis.<sup>54</sup> Central Terminal also believes it could use light-rail to connect travelers to the Buffalo Niagara International Airport.<sup>55</sup> Renovating Central Terminal would not only create jobs for WNY, but historic preservation is a “green solution” as opposed to building a new terminal.<sup>56</sup> Central Terminal is located on tracks that

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<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> *Id.*

<sup>50</sup> *Id.*

<sup>51</sup> High Speed Rail New York Coalition. “Regional Impact Statement.” July 31, 2009.

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*

<sup>53</sup> Buffalo Central Terminal. “Buffalo Central Terminal Is Right For High Speed Rail.” Official Website. 2009-2011. <http://buffalocentralterminal.org/about/buffalo-central-terminal-is-right-for-high-speed-rail/>.

<sup>54</sup> *Id.*

<sup>55</sup> *Id.*

<sup>56</sup> *Id.*

would allow trains to turn and reach Chicago, something no other station in WNY has the capacity (at this time) to do.<sup>57</sup>

Politicians also believe restoring Central Terminal would be a smart move. Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown believes the restoration could open up Buffalo's East Side.<sup>58</sup> Senator Kirsten Gillibrand believes the restoration of Central Terminal could be a success citing the successful restoration of terminals Washington, D.C. and New York City.<sup>59</sup> Senator Gillibrand, along with Senator Charles Schumer also believes that HSR would promote development of blighted neighborhoods in the city, much like Mayor Brown.

Politicians also believe HSR would connect Buffalo to commercial opportunities in cities like Chicago, Toronto and Montreal.<sup>60</sup> Representative Slaughter suggested that a loop between Buffalo, Toronto and Montreal could be created to connect the cities and spur growth through business and tourism.<sup>61</sup> Slaughter suggests a smaller city like Buffalo would be an ideal location for secondary offices of Toronto business, where office spaces is costly and at a premium.<sup>62</sup> She believes this loop, which she has discussed with the Canadian government, would “connect major and minor cities on both sides of the border” and promote international business and trade.”<sup>63</sup>

In addition to business opportunities, the tourism industry could benefit from completion of a HSR system. The New York Coalition for High-Speed Rail states that Upstate New York tourism industry is a \$12 billion dollar sector of the New York State economy, and this industry would be positively impacted by a HSR system allowing for greater ease in travel and

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<sup>57</sup> *Id.*

<sup>58</sup> *Id.*

<sup>59</sup> Buffalo Central Terminal. “Buffalo Central Terminal Is Right For High Speed Rail.” Official Website. 2009-2011.

<sup>60</sup> *Id.*

<sup>61</sup> Sondel, Justin. “Catching That Train.” April 16, 2009. [http://artvoice.com/issues/v8n16/catching\\_that\\_train](http://artvoice.com/issues/v8n16/catching_that_train).

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*

<sup>63</sup> *Id.*

accessibility to tourism hotspots in the area.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, the Coalition suggests that the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, which hosts over 760,000 patient visits per year, would also benefit from HSR.<sup>65</sup> The Coalition believes HSR could connect the Buffalo and Rochester medial campuses to other locations such as the Cleveland Clinic creating regional partnerships.<sup>66</sup> Clearly, HSR presents opportunities for growth through new opportunities and collaborative efforts. However, are these results environmentally friendly, or will they simply add to the pollution and environmental problems already caused by the transportation industry?

### **How Will High-Speed Rail Impact the Environment**

For projects like HSR, which seek federal funding, an Environmental Impact Statement (“EIS”) is required as part of the federal National Environmental Policy Act (“NEPA”).<sup>67</sup> For the Empire Corridor project, the EIS has been broken down into two tiers.<sup>68</sup> The first tier will examine state level environmental impacts and solutions; and the second level will examine on a local level these impacts and solutions.<sup>69</sup> New York is currently in Tier 1 of this process having submitted notice that they will prepare an EIS.<sup>70</sup> New York has begun the ‘scoping’ process of Tier 1, which will allow the State to modify or redefine the Purpose and Need statement, before distributing the EIS in the Spring of 2012.<sup>71</sup> The New York High Speed Rail Coalition believes HSR will draw people out of their cars and into the more environmentally friendly HSR trains.<sup>72</sup> By reducing the amount of cars taking cross-state trips, the Coalition believes there will be lower

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<sup>64</sup> High Speed Rail New York Coalition. “Regional Impact Statement.” July 31, 2009.

<sup>65</sup> *Id.*

<sup>66</sup> *Id.*

<sup>67</sup> New York State Department of Transportation. “Online Public Briefing.” 1999-2011.

<sup>68</sup> *Id.*

<sup>69</sup> *Id.*

<sup>70</sup> *Id.*

<sup>71</sup> New York State Department of Transportation. “High Speed Rail Corridor Project.” Is. 1, October 2010. <http://www.bcny.org/inside/transport/2010/HighSpeedRailEmpireCorridorProject-Iss1.pdf>.

<sup>72</sup> High Speed Rail New York Coalition. “Regional Impact Statement.” July 31, 2009.

vehicle emissions and fuel usage.<sup>73</sup> The Coalition also states that with fewer cars and less highway congestion, the need for highway expansion projects will be eliminated.<sup>74</sup> An interesting aspect to examine if the HSR project becomes a reality will be the need for rail expansion and the potential environmental harm versus that of highway expansion. Finally, the Coalition believes HSR will encourage people to live closer to urban centers and reduce suburban sprawl.<sup>75</sup>

In Europe, HSR is seen in many cities as the “green” form of transportation. The International Union of Railways suggests a HSR train can carry eight times as many passengers as an airplane over a given distance, while using the same amount of energy and emitting a quarter of the carbon dioxide per passenger.<sup>76</sup> While HSR has shown to be environmentally effective in Europe, transporting up to 400,000 people per day, with many trains holding more passengers than an Airbus<sup>77</sup>, what is sometimes forgotten is the environmental impact of building the actual rail lines.<sup>78</sup> Eric Morris studied the construction of a HSR line in the United Kingdom, and stated that HSR was environmentally friendly from an operations standpoint, but when the construction process, with bulldozers and earthmovers’ emissions is also considered, the environmental advantage HSR had over air travel is all but eliminated.<sup>79</sup> However, the United States is much larger, and likely has more air travel than the United Kingdom, so Morris’ observation is interesting, but without further investigation, it cannot be concluded the same result would be found in the United States.

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<sup>73</sup> *Id.*

<sup>74</sup> *Id.*

<sup>75</sup> High Speed Rail New York Coalition. “Regional Impact Statement.” July 31, 2009.

<sup>76</sup> Burnett, Victoria. “Spain’s High-Speed Rail Offers Guideposts for U.S.” May 29, 2009.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/30/business/energy-environment/30trains.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/30/business/energy-environment/30trains.html?_r=1).

<sup>77</sup> International Union of Railways. “About High Speed Rail.” Official Website. 2011.

<sup>78</sup> Morris, Eric A. “High-Speed Rail and CO2.” July 24, 2009. <http://www.freakonomics.com/2009/07/24/high-speed-rail-and-co2/>.

<sup>79</sup> *Id.*

## **High Costs of High-Speed Rail Make Some Want to Jump off the Train**

Apart from this potential environmental wash, the main criticism of HSR is the price tag. The cost of implementing a HSR network comparable to Europe or Japan would cost billions of dollars. New York State received \$151 million dollars for the HSR project; however, this would not cover the costs of building additional sets of tracks. Representative Slaughter estimates that completing the HSR projects in WNY alone would cost approximately \$150 million dollars.<sup>80</sup> In August of 2009, New York applied for \$561 million in federal money for “shovel ready” projects relating to the HSR project.<sup>81</sup> In October of that same year, the State applied for \$11.6 billion to fully develop a statewide HSR network.<sup>82</sup> Both applications were rejected. However, it was suggested part of this was because federal officials were unimpressed by New York’s HSR application and proposals.<sup>83</sup>

Other states received large amounts of federal funding for HSR projects—Illinois and Missouri received \$1.1 billion to improve the rail services between Chicago and St. Louis, and Washington and Oregon received \$590 million to improve services between Seattle and Portland.<sup>84</sup> Florida and Wisconsin received \$1.25 billion and \$830 million respectively to improve their rail systems.<sup>85</sup> However, both Florida and Wisconsin returned the federal funding, citing cash-strapped states who would be unable to hold up their end of the funding for HSR.<sup>86</sup> New York applied for Wisconsin’s unused funds, along with unused funds from Ohio (which

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<sup>80</sup> Slaughter, Rep. Louise M., “High Speed Rail.” Official Website. 2011.

[http://www.louise.house.gov/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=77&Itemid=130](http://www.louise.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=77&Itemid=130).

<sup>81</sup> WGRZ. “New York Behind in High Speed Rail Funding.” WGRZ.com. Jan. 29, 2010.

<http://www.wgrz.com/news/local/story.aspx?storyid=73988&provider=gnews>.

<sup>82</sup> *Id.*

<sup>83</sup> WGRZ. “New York Behind in High Speed Rail Funding.” WGRZ.com. Jan. 29, 2010.

<sup>84</sup> *Id.*

<sup>85</sup> *Id.*

<sup>86</sup> Capital Tonight. “NY Vies For Florida’s High-Speed Rail Cash.” <http://www.capitaltonight.com/2011/02/ny-vies-for-floridas-high-speed-rail-cash/>.

also returned federal funds) and received \$7.3 million of the \$1.26 billion returned by Wisconsin and Ohio.<sup>87</sup> New York has also applied to receive Florida's returned funds, which total \$2.4 billion.<sup>88</sup> In a pitch to secure the returned funds, Representative Slaughter wrote Transportation Secretary LaHood stating New York's commitment to HSR and its understanding that "an improved transportation system is vital to our national security" as the reasons New York should receive the funds.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, Senator Schumer released a statement saying HSR was a "top priority" of New York and that "Florida's loss should be New York's gain."<sup>90</sup>

Despite Representative Slaughter and Senator's Schumer's push for the additional funding, two freshman Representatives from New York in Congress have written Transportation Secretary LaHood "urging him to abandon plans" for HSR in New York.<sup>91</sup> Representatives Tom Reed and Ann Marie Buerkle believe construction of HSR in New York is not practical.<sup>92</sup> Both added that they felt it better served to put the limited resources available towards "projects that are essential and have the potential for long-term self sufficiency."<sup>93</sup> Representative Slaughter countered saying those who opposed HSR were opposing "thousands of new jobs and economic opportunities in upstate New York."<sup>94</sup> The economic debate is difficult, especially with tightened government budgets.

The 2011 budgets of New York State and the Federal Government have resulted in billions of dollars of cuts. There are still many unanswered questions as to how these budget cuts will affect HSR. However, it appears (based on all up-to-date information) New York and

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<sup>87</sup> *Id.*

<sup>88</sup> *Id.*

<sup>89</sup> Capital Tonight. "NY Vies For Florida's High-Speed Rail Cash." <http://www.capitaltonight.com/2011/02/ny-vies-for-floridas-high-speed-rail-cash/>.

<sup>90</sup> *Id.*

<sup>91</sup> McCarthy, Robert J. "Two seek to derail high-speed train plan." Buffalo News, March 28, 2011, at B1.

<sup>92</sup> *Id.*

<sup>93</sup> *Id.*

<sup>94</sup> McCarthy, Robert J. "Two seek to derail high-speed train plan." Buffalo News, March 28, 2011, at B1.

Western New York avoided drastic cuts to HSR funding. While the federal budget deal resulted in a \$1.5 billion cut to the HSR budget (from \$2.5 billion to \$1 billion), this cut does not affect funds already allocated to New York State.<sup>95</sup> New York was awarded \$60 million of the \$2 billion Florida returned, most of this \$2 billion, \$795 million, was awarded to the Washington-New York-Boston corridor where the hope is to make improvements to allow trains to run at speeds of up to 160 miles per hour.<sup>96</sup> The \$60 million will be used primarily to upgrade tracks in the Upstate New York region, specifically Albany and Schenectady.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, \$1.4 million will be used to conduct “preliminary engineering and environmental analysis” for a new train station in Rochester.<sup>98</sup> Representative Slaughter said New York received the returned Florida funds because “New York is willing to embrace the vision that other states have rejected.”<sup>99</sup> She also reiterated her belief that HSR would “reduce travel time significantly, and expand the Western New York labor market.”<sup>100</sup>

Despite Representative Slaughter’s optimism, many House Republicans have criticized the Obama Administrations decision to reallocate the \$2 billion returned by Florida.<sup>101</sup> The main criticism was not the decision to reallocate the funds, but rather how the funds were reallocated to nearly two-dozen projects instead of “concentrating on fewer major projects.”<sup>102</sup> House Transportation Committee Chairman John Mica said that Amtrak, who operates most of the passenger rail service in the Northeast, was incapable of carrying out the HSR transition project.<sup>103</sup> Despite Chairman Mica’s concerns, Amtrak spokesperson Steve Kulm said the current

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<sup>95</sup> Zremski, Jerry. “WNY averts worst cuts as Congress OKs budge.” Buffalo News, April 15, 2011, at A1.

<sup>96</sup> “WNY gets rail money.” Lockport Union-Sun & Journal, May 10, 2011.

<sup>97</sup> *Id.*

<sup>98</sup> *Id.*

<sup>99</sup> *Id.*

<sup>100</sup> *Id.*

<sup>101</sup> Mitchell, Josh. “U.S. Parcels Out \$2 Billion for Rail. The Wall Street Journal, May 10, 2011.

<sup>102</sup> *Id.*

<sup>103</sup> *Id.*

smaller projects were necessary to eventually reach the goal of 220 mile per hour trains.<sup>104</sup> Kulm said the projects helped by this funding are “not particularly sexy,” but these basic infrastructure improvements were necessary to reach the ultimate goal.<sup>105</sup> These infrastructure improvements are also necessary to ease some of the concerns owners of freight rail lines have about HSR.

### **Can Freight Rail and High-Speed Passenger Rail Coexist?**

Opponents of HSR also cite the questions surrounding CSX Corporation, who represents many of the freight trains that run throughout New York.<sup>106</sup> The question involves CSX’s willingness to sign off on HSR in New York for fear of what it would be for the freight train industry. The concerns were over an agreement signed between CSX and the passenger rail industry, which stated any new HSR tracks would be at least thirty feet away from freight rail tracks.<sup>107</sup> However, in June of 2010, CSX stated it reached an agreement with New York State allowing planning of HSR to move forward.<sup>108</sup> The plan is to build new tracks on CSX’s right of way, an option that is cheaper than buying privately owned land.<sup>109</sup> Despite the purported agreements, there is still tension between the two parties, as CSX has accused New York of ignoring the initial agreement to keep all HSR track thirty feet away from freight track.<sup>110</sup> Whether this issue can be resolved and how it might slow down New York’s HSR plans is yet to be seen.

### **Suggestions, Predictions, Solutions(?)**

On a recent trip to Europe, I noticed how crowded the train stations were. People in Europe have embraced HSR. Many individual European countries have developed their own rail

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<sup>104</sup> *Id.*

<sup>105</sup> *Id.*

<sup>106</sup> McCarthy, Robert J. “Two seek to derail high-speed train plan.” Buffalo News, March 28, 2011, at B1.

<sup>107</sup> “NY-CSXT agree on high speed rail.” Railway Track & Structures Official Website. June 14, 2010.

<http://www.rtands.com/newsflash/n.y.-csx-agree-on-high-speed-rail.html>.

<sup>108</sup> *Id.*

<sup>109</sup> *Id.*

<sup>110</sup> *Id.*



lines; Italy for example has Italia Rail. This line allows Italians to travel all over their country for business or pleasure. The commuter rail routes are part of the greater system, allowing for a simple yet efficient system. An hour trip from Florence to Pisa cost only twenty dollars round trip. With the price of gas rising, this is an outstanding value. Additionally, the ease of train travel is excellent whether you are a businessperson or tourist. We were able to arrive at the train station at 12:30pm, purchase our tickets and board the 1pm train. Finally, the train stations are in close proximity to the major business and tourist areas, which means travelers will not have to worry about taxis or additional transportation once they exit the train.

The United States, specifically New York State, should base their HSR system off the European model. The distance from Rome to Milan is approximately the same as from Buffalo to New York City. Travel time from Rome to Milan is on average three and a half hours,<sup>111</sup> this would be an excellent selling point to New Yorkers who might be skeptical of HSR. Obviously, the cost to implement a system capable of these travel times is costly. However, despite the high initial costs, I feel given the right situation HSR would become a popular means of transportation.

Again using New York as an example, with the price of gas continuing to rise, traveling by car from Buffalo to Syracuse would cost a driver almost seventy dollars round trip in gasoline, and that assumes their car averages thirty-four miles to the gallon. If New York could implement a HSR system and sustain prices similar to those of Italia Rail, that trip to Syracuse would cost about thirty dollars and you would arrive forty minutes earlier than if you traveled by car.

I could anticipate opposition to this example, asking who would purchase tickets from Buffalo to Syracuse regularly enough to make the routes worth running and the prices lower

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<sup>111</sup> Italia Rail. "Timetable Rome to Milan." [www.italiarail.com/timetable](http://www.italiarail.com/timetable).2011.

enough. Understandably, the comparisons between Italy and New York run into difficulties when you try to compare tourist traffic. Italian cities garner much more tourism than do New York's cities, with the exception of New York City. However, there are enough businesses with offices in Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and Albany, that HSR could become a staple for business travel between these cities. Additionally, if HSR could revive city centers, perhaps tourism in these cities would increase. There are also many colleges located along this section of cities; these students would be another potential rail client.

In order to make HSR in New York successful, the State must sell HSR as a true alternative to flying or driving. The State and the rail industry must prove that HSR will efficiently transport passengers from city to city at a speed that is not only safe, but is also faster than flying or driving. Additionally, there must be a willingness to sell HSR tickets at affordable prices that are substantially cheaper than airline prices. Airlines like Southwest and JetBlue allow travelers to fly from Buffalo to New York City for as low as one hundred twenty dollars (given the right promotion or time). A HSR ticket from Buffalo to New York City would have to be consistently priced lower than that one hundred twenty dollar benchmark. The price difference, and limited security inconvenience at train stations, I believe, would attract people and also account for the slightly longer travel time via train (four hours for train, two and a half hours for air given the right circumstances). I think people are prime for an alternative to driving and flying as driving long distances is becoming more expensive each day, and flying is not only costly, but also frustrates many travelers due to security measures, delays and the various other hassles that have plagued the airline industry for the past decade.

Selling HSR as an alternative to car and air travel will likely be as easy as selling people on alternative energies as a replacement to oil dependency. There will be those who jump on the

idea and will champion it from the start, like Representative Slaughter has done. However, many people will see the time and costs associated with implementing an HSR system and view it as more of a dream than a reality. Due to the costs and construction time, the benefits of HSR might not be evident to the average citizen for years after the process begins. I am not suggesting there would not be struggles and upfront costs, which in a still unstable economy could be a risky undertaking. It is certainly a political risk as of this moment, but what isn't a political risk in today's political climate.

Despite these risks and trepidations, there is an even greater risk that lies buried beneath the stories and debates that grab the headlines. What happens if and/or when major sections of the infrastructure in the United States gives out? It is my belief that the money poured into yearly road repairs could be spent on HSR. I am not suggesting we ignore the roadways and bridges, but rather we portion the funding. Repair what desperately needs repair, but at the same time invest in an alternative. If HSR will lessen the traffic on American highways, eventually, those yearly repair projects might only need to be every other year. I feel the infrastructure problem is comparable to the oil dependency problem. What happens when the oil runs out? The United States will either be prepared with alternatives or they will be behind and forced speedily develop alternatives they could have been perfecting for years.

However, it seems just as it was twenty years ago, budget constraints and monetary costs are bringing the HSR project to a screeching halt. Despite the promise of added jobs and long-term payoffs, there does not seem to be enough support of HSR to deem it an essential or important enough project to secure the necessary funding. There is still the chance that minor changes will be made to improve the current passenger rail system; however, it does not seem the United States or WNY are on the fast track to building a HSR system comparable to those in

foreign countries. This is unfortunate; the United States believes it is still the number one superpower in the world, yet it is the only ‘superpower’ without an effective HSR system. The costs are high, but I believe the end result would be worth the price, especially in a state like New York.

HSR is something that ultimately could have success in New York State. There are enough people traveling from Buffalo to Albany or New York City on a regular basis to believe HSR would be utilized as an alternative means of transportation. Even if the process takes time, it is a worthwhile investment. If the system were implemented properly, the future benefits would greatly outweigh the upfront costs. There would be an effective transportation system in place, which would provide people an alternative to driving or flying. There would be a reduction in the carbon footprint, assuming the proposed data predictions are correct. The rail projects would create jobs not only in the initial construction phases, but also in the long term. Restoration of old terminals and also city centers would provide job creation and a much-needed economic boost to struggling cities. These cities could use HSR as a means to expand their workforce and tourism.

Ultimately, the HSR projects in New York and in the United States must be properly planned and implemented at a time when they could be successfully completed to the full potential of the plan’s design. The current economic and political climate might not be right for substantial investment in HSR. However, steps can be taken to ready the rail systems and prepare them for a climate when substantial investment in HSR is appropriate. There are many factors that will determine the success or failure of HSR in the United States. Those who want to see HSR in the United States will need to continue to advocate for HSR, and keep the notion that a

HSR system could be implemented and would be effective in the ears of the public and politicians.